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VOL. XXIX

APRIL, 1919

NO. 2

# THE MONIST

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## CARLYLE'S PLACE IN PHILOSOPHY.

CARLYLE was not, in the technical sense, a philosopher. According to one eminent critic<sup>1</sup> it is a monstrous thing to have applied such a name in any sense to the man who never set out from premises and reasoned his way to conclusions, and who never thought calmly but always in a passion. Indeed the objurgatory tone in which Carlyle alludes to the current systems and controversies may well suggest a complete detachment from any "philosophic" interest whatever. Such speculation betokened for him a sceptical, and hence a paralytic, period of the world. He looked back with wistfulness to the time when all men could still avow the same unhesitating *Credo*, when Mother Church still supplied to each a competent theory of the universe.<sup>2</sup> What William James has called the "divided soul" was to Carlyle an object of constant pity, and we can imagine the rapture with which he would have welcomed the conception of the "once-born." It was he who coined the phrase "disease of metaphysics."<sup>3</sup> It was he who mourned that religion had degenerated into theories of religion, into mere apologetics "endeavoring with smallest result to make it probable that such a thing as religion exists."<sup>4</sup> It was he who dismissed political science with the scornful comment that this sort of inquiry makes ever

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Spencer; see *Autobiog.*, I, 380ff.

<sup>2</sup> "Characteristics," *Crit. Misc.*, III, 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

a renewed appearance in ages of decadence.<sup>5</sup> It was he who instituted that pungent contrast between Bacon, "discovering a new method of discovering truth"—a *novum organum* which was to "make men of us all"—and Kepler, "making by natural *vetus* organum, by the light of his own flaming soul....the greatest discovery yet made by man."<sup>6</sup> And it was he who stigmatized as an ultimate, unsurpassable folly in modern thought the enterprise of "accounting for the moral sense."<sup>7</sup>

One must, indeed, remember his concession that the mental sciences, although an evil, are a necessary evil. He held that they could reach no positive result, but that they must be pursued to their end, that they must be judged, as our Hegelians would say, by themselves at a further stage. It was something that reflection should thus be brought to a wholesome crisis, that it should be made to demonstrate its own futility, and the fire of scepticism thus burn itself out.<sup>8</sup> The way would then be clear for a reassertion of the healthy instincts and intuitions of mankind. Yet surely, if we bring together the relevant passages in Carlyle's works, we find that his own method of thinking yielded something far beyond this merely negative outcome. Like every one else who has set out to overthrow systematic reason, he has ended by giving us a system, more or less coherent, of his own. The present article will limit itself to the field of ethics and metaphysics, endeavoring to show that Carlyle's genius there anticipated some results to which a later generation had to attain step by step. It is true that he expressed himself in a language very different from that of the schools. Much of his energy was devoted to denouncing the utilitarian ethics, but a Mill or a Bain

<sup>5</sup> *F. R.*, II, 7. Cf. "Characteristics," *Crit. Misc.*, III, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Historical Sketches*, p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> "Shooting Niagara," *Crit. Misc.*, V, 28.

<sup>8</sup> "Characteristics," *Crit. Misc.*, III, 40.

could see little in what he said which even called for a reply, little more in short than a windy rhetoric which invariably missed the point. And even philosophers far removed from Mill or Bain have not, as a rule, thought of Carlyle as among the effective critics of empiricism. They have felt that the true answer is not his, but that of a calm, scientific analyst. I shall contend on the other hand that, so far from being in this province only a heated and irrelevant rhetorician, he laid his finger with astonishing accuracy upon just those weaknesses in the empirical school which later examination has forced all men to acknowledge. He avoided the technical jargon, and made his points in his own way. If those points are now among the common-places of text-book criticism, we must remember that fifty years ago to the dominant English philosophy they were rather obscurantist paradox. It is time for us to give due credit to one whose sensibility, like that of the artist in *Daniel Deronda*,<sup>9</sup> seized combinations which science now explains and justifies.

## I.

a. It is usual to quote *Characteristics* as containing the principle that philosophy is a useless and an impossible pursuit. But this was not Carlyle's earliest, and it is not his most constant, attitude. His complaint in *Signs of the Times* is rather that the subject is dead, gone with Dugald Stewart, "its last amiable cultivator." And he found the cause of its death in the fact that it had become completely mechanized. The *Zeitgeist* was wholly mechanical. Power looms, steamships, school "methods" in education, institutional churches, "Royal and Imperial Institutes" for the advancement of literature,—these were all products of a common spirit, all tokens of the prevailing trust in machinery. Did not the new-fangled incubator

<sup>9</sup> *Daniel Deronda*, Chap. XLI.

threaten to supersede the activities of the brood-hen?<sup>10</sup> This faith in external apparatus seemed to Carlyle to have gone much too far, for it had obscured the one thing needful. Creative work had its ultimate source in a native insight, which could never be analyzed into a combination of forces artificially put together. It was the silent thought of a Newton, with little equipment beyond paper and pencil, which had given us the system of the planetary paths. What one saw in the later, mechanical days was a museum with retorts, digesters, and galvanic piles, where Nature was being interrogated by "some quite other than Newton," and Nature in turn showed no haste to respond.<sup>11</sup>

The same spirit had given us mere physiological psychology as an account of man's intellectual life. Carlyle saw with horror that the school of Locke still reigned, with its laws of association, its resolving of the mental enigma into a problem in coexistences and sequences as these reveal themselves to a superficial introspection. Thinking was "explained" by having its physical concomitants pointed out. The hope seemed to be cherished that higher power microscopes might yet enable mind itself to be *seen*! Had not Cabanis lately announced that thought is a "secretion" and that the spiritual product which we call poetry is the special province of the smaller intestines? This to Carlyle was not so much a falsifying as a simple ignoring of the true philosophic problem. Where mechanical causation was thus assumed as the key to all phenomena, no one would raise the previous issue as to the very notion of cause. The grand secrets of the soul's relation to time, to space, to the universe of matter, and to God, had quietly dropped out of sight.<sup>12</sup>

The futility of this mechanical method is illustrated by a profusion of examples from the moral and social sphere.

<sup>10</sup> "Signs of the Times," *Crit. Misc.*, II, 60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Bentham had envisaged mankind after the manner of physics, as a collection of spiritual atoms, each acted on by motives, which turn out in the end to be varied combinations of a single motive—the desire for pleasure.<sup>13</sup> Yet who ever saw a human being thus dragged hither and thither by impulses external to himself? How could such a formula explain the heroisms and the chivalries of history?<sup>14</sup> Was it not plain that a nice balancing of this motive against that, with a determination at all costs to procure for oneself a surplus of enjoyment, was just the account which should *not* be given of Crusaders, of Puritans, of Christian martyrs, of French Revolutionists, of any one in short who acted under a flaming passion? So far from its being true that mankind could follow only the line of greatest ease and of least resistance, we should rather say that enterprises of hardship and of difficulty are the real allurements for the human heart.<sup>15</sup> Witness the poor swearing recruit who does not think primarily of the shilling a day but of "the honor of a soldier," and even the most frivolous class in our society who, if they can remember nothing else, still make much of what they call "a point of honor."<sup>16</sup> For the principle of greatest happiness thank God there were always some who would substitute the principle of greatest nobleness.

Moreover, argues Carlyle, if we grant for a moment this atomistic psychology of motive, we shall be left with the idea of obligation not only unvindicated but even unexplained. For the criterion of mere pleasingness could give no priority to one pleasure over another. Nor was there any principle by which such random impulses in a multitude of men could be united into a social whole. If every man's selfishness, infinitely expansive, were to be hemmed in only by the infinitely expansive selfishness of

<sup>13</sup> Cf., e. g., *Heroes*, Lect. II.

<sup>14</sup> *Sartor*, III, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Heroes*, II.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

every other man, upon what centripetal force could we rely to prevent a return to chaos?<sup>17</sup> Conscience surely was something more than a suborned auxiliary, useful for social purposes to the constable and the hangman. The checks and balances and all the cunning mechanism of self-interest which utilitarian philosophers valued so highly were nothing but so many efforts to solve this problem: "Given a world of rogues, how to produce an honesty from their combined action?"<sup>18</sup> Terrors of conscience to such men would be of little worth, not to be compared, for example, with diseases of the liver. If obligation meant no more than this, then "not on morality but on cookery let us build our stronghold; there, brandishing our frying-pan as censer, let us offer sweet incense to the Devil, and live at ease on the fat things he has provided for his elect."<sup>19</sup>

The last unavailing protest against this spirit of mechanizing had, in Carlyle's view, been raised by the Scottish school, which was clear-sighted enough to recognize whither things were tending, but was itself too deeply sunk in the same error to find any solution. Reid had a dim notion that something was wrong, but knew not how to right it. So, instead of boldly denying the premises, he "let loose instinct, as an undiscriminating bandog to guard him against the conclusions!"<sup>20</sup>

b. But our author has a more serious criticism upon philosophers than any which confines itself to the method or the results of a particular group of them. In *Characteristics* he appears at all events to contend that the whole enterprise of philosophy involves a mistake.

He likens the questioning mind to the disordered body. In each case an acute consciousness of self is a symptom that something has gone astray. The normal organ does

<sup>17</sup> "Voltaire," *Crit. Misc.*

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Bentham's own description of the Panopticon as "a mill for grinding rogues honest and idle men industrious." (*Works*, X, 226.)

<sup>19</sup> *Sartor*, II, 7.

<sup>20</sup> "Signs of the Times," *Crit. Misc.*, II, 64.

not need to be watched, or constantly readjusted, and the normal spirit would never be distracted by "problems" or arrest its harmonious functioning in order to introspect. This analogy is driven home by vivid examples;—the rude countryman, in perfect health just because, so far as he knew, he had no "system"; the skilled boxer, innocent of anatomy, who would not hit better for having studied the *flexor longus* and *flexor brevis*; Walter Shandy whose reasoning was not perceptibly improved by a course in Aristotle. Anatomists and metaphysicians were to be reckoned among the melancholy products of the fall of man. The beam of white light renders all things visible, but, because of its very whiteness, is itself unseen, and some irregular obstruction is required to break it up into colors. In the same sense discussions, about virtue for example, are a sign that virtue is on the wane. Patriotism is losing its grip when men write treatises to give it a basis. Social cohesion is in a bad way when a *Contrat Social* is needed to solder men together. The publication of Paley's *Evidences* was an ominous portent for religion. For everywhere the token of health is unconsciousness, and the token of disease is an anxious listening to oneself.

Applying this to metaphysics, our author points out that the quest for a theorem of the universe proceeds from a break-up of the true spiritual unity. And at bottom what it asks is impossible. The universe cannot be put into a theorem by any finite mind. If he had to choose between them Carlyle would prefer dogmatic to sceptical speculation; not that either can heal the disorder of the soul, but that one is, relatively speaking, a stage of convalescence, the other a stage of relapse. The whole spurious problem means an attempt of the mind to pass beyond itself, to reach a point of view from which it can judge not only other things but itself also *ab extra*. The act of knowing is everywhere conditioned by the subject-object

contrast; yet the metaphysician would fain compel this very machinery to account for the conditions of its own action. He would know absolutely that which, *ex hypothesi*, he can know only as related. Carlyle illustrates this procedure by two similitudes which are at least as striking as any which the critics of absolutism have since devised, that of the athlete who would so develop his sinews that he may be able to lift up his own body, and that of the Irish saint who swam the Channel, carrying his head in his teeth.<sup>21</sup>

Such being the metaphysical purpose, it was easy to see why the labor of thousands of years had been so inexpressibly unproductive. For instance, how pathetic, yet how fatuous, had been the attempts to demonstrate a God! As if a God who could be *proved*, or—more ludicrous still—rendered *probable*, would not thereby take his place as just one object among other objects, rather than as that in which all alike live and move and have their being! What, asks Carlyle, was this problem which the poor deists set themselves, but to ground the beginning of all belief in some belief earlier than the beginning?<sup>22</sup> And was it not high time to confess that if intellect, or the power of knowing and believing, is synonymous with logic, or the mere power of arranging and communicating, no proof of a Deity is to be had? At the utmost one might reach that *Etre Suprême*, the subject of Robespierre's "scraggiest of prophetic discourses."<sup>23</sup> Metaphysical theology had been but the multiplication of words, until the earth groaned under accumulated phrases, but the enterprise was foredoomed from the start. "*Cogito, ergo sum*: Alas, poor Cogitator, this takes us but a little way.... The secret of man's being is still like the Sphinx's secret, a riddle that

<sup>21</sup> "Characteristics," *Crit. Misc.*, III, 27.

<sup>22</sup> "Diderot," *Crit. Misc.*, 237.

<sup>23</sup> "Mirabeau," *Crit. Misc.*, 407; cf. *F. R.*, VI, 4.

he cannot rede."<sup>24</sup> For Carlyle's own part, the utmost he had got from metaphysics—and it was no small gain in a sense—was the bliss of becoming delivered from them altogether.<sup>25</sup> Hume and Diderot on the one side, Kant on the other, served but to refute the alternative conclusions, and to confirm by trial what might have been foretold from the very terms of the problem, that the metaphysical road leads nowhere.

## II.

It has often been said that a thoroughly consistent scepticism ought to be silent, and one might conclude from the foregoing argument that its author would advance no positive doctrine of his own upon subjects which he had thus declared inscrutable. Moreover, his repeated insistence on the vanity of all "speech about the unspeakable things" has given rise to the well-worn jest that Carlyle preached the gospel of silence in thirty volumes. But we have seen that the discussion which on these high altitudes he condemned as useless was that of the logical or demonstrating type, where the basis of all thought is forced under thought-categories, and the arguer affects to prove that which is already assumed in every process of proof. If the sphere of science may be compared to territory which we can look at from outside, what is the analogue to that ground which we cannot see, just because we have to stand upon it in order to see all the rest? If it should turn out that logical demonstration is not man's only organon of truth, one may without incoherence set forth in words that other spiritual functioning, so far as words will serve to give it expression. The route by which Carlyle thus went forward to his cosmic scheme seems to have been as follows.

<sup>24</sup> *Sartor*, I, 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Lectures on Literature*.

Destructive criticism has so far simply cleared the ground. If it has been correct it has shown that the methods of the sciences, and of that metaphysic which is no more than a unification of the sciences, can tell us nothing on the problems which matter most of all, problems of the ground of all being, of freedom and necessity, of good and evil, of the nature and prospects of the soul. For that with which the sciences deal is always something which I may call *mine* but which I cannot call *me*. Every attempt to resolve the latter into a combination of the former may be convicted of contradiction, for it takes as independently real those objects which can exist and contain meaning only in reference to a subject. Science is thus always a study of some species of *clothes*, and to know the limitations of science we require above all a *clothes-philosophy*. "Let any cause-and-effect philosopher explain, not why I wear such and such a garment, obey such and such a law, but even why I am here, to wear and obey anything."<sup>26</sup> The real question thus becomes one which it is scarcely possible to formulate, and wholly impossible to answer, within the categories of cause-and-effect reasoning. For the thing we seek to know is not what particular effect was produced by a particular cause, but what is the total significance of a universe in which such a nexus of causality has been established, and whether that nexus is itself an instrument in a deeper plan. Our very capacity of putting this problem is itself a token that we are not mere items in the series whose meaning we thus challenge. We are able somehow to get outside of it, to become its critics. And although the intellectualist metaphysicians have so far attempted the absurd task of construing it as a whole through principles which are valid only from part to part, the very persistence of their effort proves how fundamental is that impulse which they have so blunderingly followed.

<sup>26</sup> *Sartor*, I, 5.

Thus for Carlyle as for Wordsworth the unique position of man in the universe was evidenced above all by his "obstinate questionings of sense and outward things."

Man's unhappiness came of his greatness. The happiness of one shoebblack could not be assured by all the finance ministers and upholsterers and confectioners of modern Europe, for the shoebblack had a soul quite other than his stomach.<sup>27</sup> The starting-point for Carlyle's own cosmic scheme is just the contradiction between man as moral personality and the world as fixed under mechanical law within which this personality must unfold itself. It was necessary that these two aspects of the universe should somehow be thought together. Their unification through a mechanizing of the moral life, or through a subjection of mind to one of its own categories, had already proved impossible. What other alternative remained? Carlyle turned for a reply to that way of thinking which, under the title "German philosophy" had just begun, chiefly through the influence of Coleridge, to make its voice heard in England.<sup>28</sup> It is Carlyle's high distinction that he was one of the two men in the English-speaking world who, as early as 1829, pierced beyond the din about "laws of association" to the deeper issues which Kant had raised for European thought. It is doubtful how far Kant's work was known to him at first hand. He seems to have come into contact with it mainly through such writers as Fichte and Novalis, and, by a singular latitude of interpretation, to have read similar ideas into *Wilhelm Meister* and *Faust*. Nor did he ever take up definite discipleship in the Kantian school. He uniformly speaks of the *Kritiken* as Plato spoke of the conversations of Parmenides; they had suggested to him ideas of far-reaching fascination, upon whose

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Mark Pattison's statement that even the Oriel "Noetics" know nothing of Continental philosophy. (*Memoirs.*)

truth he did not presume to pronounce, but whose enormous significance the shallow talkers around him would do well to appreciate if they could.<sup>29</sup> One can easily see, however, that Kant is the true source, direct or indirect, of his whole further development.

Exactly in the spirit of the *Critique of Practical Reason* he lays it down that the approach to a constructive philosophy must lie through the moral consciousness. "The true Shekinah is man."<sup>30</sup> And it is man not on the side of his discordant impulses, or his mushroom speculations. It is man as conscious of duty, as recognizing within him a categorical imperative. Carlyle is very insistent that on the rational and objective, as contrasted with the emotional and subjective, doctrine of conscience the whole fabric of one's world-view must depend. He notes it as a token of the sceptical eighteenth century that men ceased to take moral obligation as intuitive and began "accounting for" it, moreover that they spoke of the antithesis between right and wrong as appreciated by a "sense," as if we had a relish for certain actions, "a sort of palate by the taste of which the nature of anything might be determined."<sup>31</sup> He pities poor Burns as one in whom even at his best morality was "an instinct only," not a rational conviction.<sup>32</sup> He pours scorn upon the attempt to conjure moral objectivity out of sentiments of honor, upon Diderot's "perpetual clatter about *vertu*, *honnêteté*, *grandeur*, *sensibilité*, *âmes nobles*," and "that interminable ravelment of reward and approval, virtue being its own reward."<sup>33</sup> He sets in glowing contrast the Mohammedan heaven and hell. Gross and material though they were, we have here a testimony to "that grand spiritual fact and beginning of facts" that "good and evil are no matters of degree, but that they are eter-

<sup>29</sup> Cf., e. g., paper on Novalis.

<sup>30</sup> *Sartor*, I, 10; cf. *Heroes*, I, 10.

<sup>31</sup> *Lectures on Literature*.

<sup>32</sup> "Burns," *Crit. Misc.*

<sup>33</sup> "Diderot," *Crit. Misc.*, III, 239.

nally incommensurable, the difference not one of finite but one of infinite moment.”<sup>34</sup> And he returns again and again to Kant’s similitude between the starry heavens and the law of duty as a depth of vision beyond which no man has ever seen or can see.

Although in the paper on Novalis he speaks of the contrast between reason and understanding as one whose subtlety baffled him, while he suspected that it was somehow profoundly true, it is clear that Carlyle had worked his own way to a very similar distinction. Kant’s insistence that the moral judgment proceeds from a faculty higher in kind than that which cognizes the relation of object to subject in a mechanically ordered world, is consonant with the whole thought of *Sartor*. Indeed this was but the technical statement of what has been fitly called Carlyle’s “mysticism”—a word which amid all its vagueness stands at least for this, that the deepest of all truths are known otherwise than by reasoning. Whether he got this principle from Fichte, or from Böhme, or from Jacobi, is a matter for the Carlyle antiquaries to decide. One may perhaps recall in this connection the protest of Coleridge against those who “have no notion that there are such things as fountains in the world. . . . and who would therefore charitably derive every rill which they behold flowing from a perforation made in some other man’s tank.”<sup>35</sup> Carlyle’s mysticism was at least worked out in an individual way. We get it, for example, in his scorn of those who dwell only “in the thin rind of the conscious,”<sup>36</sup> who recognize like the Encyclopædist no truth except that which can be debated of, and to whom in consequence the “sanctuary of man’s soul stands perennially shut.” We get it, again, in his famous theory of genius as ever a secret to itself,<sup>37</sup> of the discoverer as incomparably beyond

<sup>34</sup> *Heroes*, II.

<sup>35</sup> Preface to *Christabel*.

<sup>36</sup> “Diderot,” *Crit. Misc.*, III, 234.    <sup>37</sup> “Characteristics,” *Crit. Misc.*, III, 5.

the reasoner,<sup>38</sup> of the truly original mind as unaware of all but a mere fraction of its own active forces.<sup>39</sup> Carlyle would not readily have accepted an idea on this subject from Mill, but he does seem to have had in view just what Mill defined as the purpose of metaphysics, the study—not as in logic of those truths which are admitted on evidence but—of those other truths which may reasonably be admitted without evidence. That there are such truths he was firmly convinced. Where are they to be found?

If the human soul is the true Shekinah it seems to follow that we must look in man for a light upon the universe, not *vice versa*. If his being cannot be dissolved into uniformities of coexistence and sequence borrowed from the physical sphere, perhaps the outer world may unlock its secret to the key which is furnished by the moral consciousness? Unity may be reached, if not through the mechanizing of man, then through the spiritualizing of nature. By this, however, Carlyle understood no deistic doctrine of a divinely contrived machine, nor yet a world conceived as subject to recurring interference by its Maker. There were no miracles, except in that deep sense in which all is miraculous, the sense that nothing occurs as the result of blind forces, and that behind every scientific "explanation" there remains a mystery which no science can probe. For the cosmic outlook which he thus commends Carlyle has chosen the suggestive name "natural supernaturalism."

He defends it in the first instance by the familiar arguments of the idealist. These come oddly enough from one who professes to have abjured metaphysic, but the paper on Novalis in which they occur belongs to that early period in which Carlyle was still highly speculative. Moreover, if he talks Berkeleyanism, he does so not as one who is assured of that system's truth, but rather as one who sees in it enough to stagger the confident apostles of matter

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> "Sir Walter Scott," *Crit. Misc.*, IV, 49.

and motion. Common sense is convicted of resting upon a spiritual postulate, the postulate that the world is interpretable, that the senses reveal things as they really are, hence that the Power which made and the mind which studies nature are harmonious. "So true is it that for these men also all knowledge of the visible rests on belief of the invisible, and derives its first meaning and certainty therefrom."<sup>40</sup> We are reminded of the relativity of every sense-datum to the organ that receives it, and of the consequent doubt as to what the *absolute* existence of any object can be. Fichte's principle of all phenomena as due to a non-ego, regarding which the last scientific analysis leaves a residuum that is unknowable, is combined with Kant's subjectivity of space and time to lead us into a reverent agnosticism. The reign of wonder is declared to be native to man, for it belongs to him both at his lowest and at his highest. But it is an intermittent reign. In seasons of superficial *Aufklärung* it is a sort of "reign *in partibus infidelium*."<sup>41</sup>

The use of this last phrase is typically Carlylean, one of those revealing comparisons by which, as with a flash, the whole tenor of an abstract argument is lit up. The ubiquitous sway of wonder, against which Diderot and the rest of the cocksure Encyclopædists had effected a local revolt, would reassert itself, even as the Church looked forward to winning back her temporary apostates. Carlyle exhausts himself in depicting how deep is that mystery which real thinkers must acknowledge. Only the surface of things had been or could be penetrated by reflection. What availed it to know that nature was a system, while the laws of the system were known to only an infinitesimal extent? Who could say, for example, what is and what is not miraculous? To the Dutch king of Siam any one with an air-pump and a vial of vitriolic ether might work

<sup>40</sup> "Novalis," *Crit. Misc.*, II, 25.

<sup>41</sup> *Sartor*, I, 10.

miracles at will. Our most learned physicist was, relatively speaking, like the minnow that is familiar with the pebbles and crannies of its native creek, but ignorant of trade-winds, eclipses, and monsoons by which the condition of the creek is determined.<sup>42</sup> Man had become so completely the dupe of system that whatever happened frequently was *eo ipso* taken as understood, and only the exceptional was admitted to be mysterious! Nay, it was often sufficient that an event should have received a recognized *name* in order to take it out of the realm of wonder, and place it, neatly ticketed and labeled, among our mental conquests. Yet was it not so that the very commonest facts were among the most inexplicable? "Thou wilt laugh at all that believe in a mystery? . . . *Armer Teufel!* Doth not thy cow calve? Doth not thy bull gender? Nay, peradventure, dost not thou thyself gender? Explain me that, or do one of two things: retire into private places with thy foolish cackle; or, what were better, give it up and weep, not that the world is mean, and disenchanted, and prosaic, but that thou art vain and blind!"<sup>43</sup>

Our scientific categories were thus, for Carlyle, mere modes of human classification, which had been found useful within that relatively microscopic area which man has reduced to order. It is against the mistake of accepting them as explanatory of the universe as a whole that Teufelsdröckh does not cease to protest. He is thinking of a metaphysic which employs as ultimately valid such notions as matter and force, forgetful that these are relative to the point of view of the sentient observer, that they are anthropomorphic in the sense of having been borrowed from the inner experience of volition, and that they are thus rather imposed upon than contained within the immediacy of consciousness. He aptly compares this confusion to that of one who should take the clothes in which a figure was

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, I, 11.

dressed for the figure itself. In particular Carlyle welcomes the demonstration by Kant that space and time, the essential forms in which all scientific knowledge has come to us, are products from within, not data from without. He sees here an intelligible construing of the religious doctrine that God is omnipresent and eternal.<sup>44</sup> For its difficulty vanishes once we realize that God exists neither in time nor in space.

Thus the Ultimate Reality is conceived almost as Spinoza conceived his Absolute, revealed under attributes to the human understanding, but in no way bound under such attributes in its essential nature. Carlyle, whose acquaintance with Spinoza seems to have been through the medium of Goethe, could find no more adequate expression for this than in the memorable words of the Earth-Spirit in *Faust*:

"In Lebensfluthen, im Thatensturm  
Wall' ich auf und ab,  
Wehe hin und her!  
Geburt und Grab,  
Ein ewiges Meer,  
Ein wechselnd Weben,  
Ein glühend Leben,  
So schaff' ich am sausenden Webstuhl der Zeit,  
Und wirke der Gottheit lebendiges Kleid."

But that subjectivity under which he condemns our scientific concepts he will not extend to our moral convictions. There is nothing Spinozistic about his treatment of the antithesis between right and wrong. It is never alluded to, in the fashion which we should expect from such a beginning, as a "mode of finitude," or, as Mr. Bradley would say, as a stage in the progress to a point of view at which morality will be seen to be appearance. On the contrary, it is made the root from which objective knowledge, otherwise impossible, is made to spring. Man's intuition of duty is not only sure, it is the ground of his

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 8.

surety that the Absolute too is moral. Carlyle almost coincides with the attitude of Hermann Lotze, that metaphysic, otherwise a confusion in which any judgment is as demonstrable as any other, becomes an intelligible whole when we take the distinctions of conscience as not only *a* truth, but the beginning of *all* truths.

Finally, although such knowledge of the universe as spiritual is not to be attained by reasoning but through moral insight, Carlyle is ready to grant and even to insist that observation and experience may confirm or illustrate a belief which they are powerless to originate. The design argument was useless to create faith, for its strongest evidence lay in the phenomenon that man *searches for* design, and this evidence the poor doubter, by the very fact of his doubting, was unable to appreciate.<sup>45</sup> Yet the contemplation of natural adjustments in all the wonder of their detail might well strengthen a belief in divine order that was already held on higher grounds. The course of history was redeemed from chaos when history was looked upon as the working of the finger of God. But that man's life should be a moral cosmos rather than a moral chaos would appeal only to those by whom the judgments of conscience were already revered. Carlyle rejoiced, however, that man's spiritual nature has a better source from which to sustain itself than by hunting high and low for empirical corroborations that the world is other than a dead machine. He was not dependent on considerations which a Voltaire might "dispute into, or dispute out of" him. Even as consciousness of duty was the mainspring of faith, so it was by the performance of duty that faith became assured. If the universe is the expression of a moral purpose, then those who live nearest to that purpose will be best certified of its reality. The remedy for doubt lay in work, and the work to begin with was the work closest to

<sup>45</sup> Cf. "Diderot," *Crit. Misc.*, III.

one's hand. Searching for God by argument was like searching with a rushlight for the noonday sun. If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine.

There is much in natural supernaturalism which is closely analogous to the once famed "transfigured realism" of Herbert Spencer, just as there is much in Carlyle's apparently pantheistic passages of reverence for "the All" which reminds us of the cult of the Unknowable. It is when moral enthusiasm bursts the barrier of abstract thought that he forbids most definitely this tempting comparison. We shall probably find the most perfect embodiment of his world-view not in any articulated system that could be named, but in two stanzas by the poet Clough:

"And as of old from Sinai's top  
 God said that God is One,  
 By Science strict so speaks He now  
 To tell us There is None!  
 Earth goes by chemic forces; Heaven's  
 A Mechanique Celeste!  
 And heart and mind of human kind  
 A watch-work as the rest.

"Is this a Voice, as was the Voice,  
 Whose speaking told abroad,  
 When thunder pealed and mountain reeled  
 The ancient truth of God?  
 Ah, not the Voice; 'tis but the cloud,  
 The outer darkness dense,  
 Where image none, nor e'er was seen  
 Similitude of sense.  
 'Tis but the cloudy darkness dense  
 That wraps the Mount around;  
 While in amaze the people stays,  
 To hear the Coming Sound."<sup>46</sup>

### III.

What value are we to set upon these varied suggestions, both critical and constructive?

The late Professor Windelband has very justly remarked that the philosophic movement of the nineteenth

<sup>46</sup> *The New Sinai.*

century turned upon "the question as to the degree of importance which the natural-science conception of phenomena may claim for our view of the world and life as a whole."<sup>47</sup> He attributes the immense progress of that conception during the earlier years of the century to two causes, the definiteness of scientific results and their utility of application to practical needs. Side by side with this progress one recognizes a decay of the interest generically spoken of as "metaphysical." Its position could not be re-established until men saw again that science, however definite and certain, moves in a limited sphere, and that the needs of the human spirit go far beyond anything that can be described as "practical".

It is the glory of Carlyle that he maintained throughout the frenzy of English empiricism a firm hold upon the larger issues, and that he did so from no mere prejudice, social or theological, but from a clear-sighted recognition that empirical methods must quickly spend themselves, leaving the old problems just where they were. He once remarked of the eighteenth century that there was illumination indeed, of a kind, "but except the illuminated windows almost nothing to be *seen* thereby."<sup>48</sup> He would have said the same of that "psychogonical method" by which Mill was once thought to have made metaphysics an obsolete pursuit. Psychology is a natural science; as such it rests upon the common axioms and postulates of scientific procedure; and if we have no criterion beyond itself by which the limit of this procedure can be determined, the inference is not that metaphysic must become psychological but rather that it must be abandoned. Carlyle laid down this principle as clearly as Edward Caird himself. And he laid it down at that most opportune moment when psycho-physics threatened to run riot, when phrenology

<sup>47</sup> *History of Philosophy*, transl. by J. H. Tufts, p. 624.

<sup>48</sup> "Voltaire," *Crit. Misc.*

was becoming all the rage, when even Emerson allowed himself to name Spurzheim in the same intellectual class with Lavoisier and Bentham,<sup>49</sup> when even George Sand was poring over the new mapped areas of the phrenological skull.<sup>50</sup> One need not quarrel with him about his rhetoric. If he spoke at times of philosophy in language fit only for the lips of G. H. Lewes, the idea he had in mind was one to which no one like Lewes ever rose. Against phenomenalism of every type he waged the war of a genuine philosopher. Perhaps no admonition could have been more in place to the circle he addressed than his memorable call to close their Voltaire and open their Goethe.

The side of phenomenalism upon which he first seized as surest to reveal its break-down was the mechanizing of the moral life. One must feel no slight amazement at the completeness with which Carlyle anticipated almost every criticism which has since been passed upon the utilitarian moralists, and upon that atomic psychology which their system as then announced took for its starting-point. For, excepting his short and very unfruitful apprenticeship in the lecture-room of Thomas Brown, he was no technically trained philosopher. He belonged to the class now so nearly extinct of the general "man of letters"—like Macaulay, for example; and if we would appreciate his insight we cannot do better than compare Carlyle's assaults upon Bentham and James Mill with the vacuous cleverness of Macaulay's attempts in the same direction in the *Edinburgh Review*.

What are the main objections which have since been urged against utilitarianism—objections under the stress of which that system has been rendered obsolete for most

<sup>49</sup> *Essay on Self-Reliance.*

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Doumic's *George Sand*, p. 143. "In a letter to Madame d'Agoult, George Sand tells that her gardener gave notice to leave, and on asking him his reason, the simple-minded man replied, 'Madame has such an ugly head that my wife who is expecting might die of fright.'"

of us, and transformed beyond identification by those who still give it a sort of adherence? That a motive is no independent force acting upon the will from outside, and that thus the analogy of a physical system which was once so freely invoked is lacking in its essential; that the picture of man forecasting more or less pleasurable states of himself and deciding either consciously or unconsciously in view of the algebraic surplus is an intellectualist caricature of real life; that even if "character" were simply the name for a mechanical aggregate of impulses not all of these can be called "desire for pleasure" as shown by the crucial instances of a soldier who dies for his country, a martyr who sacrifices himself for a principle, and in short every one who forgets calculation in an overmastering enthusiasm; that society cannot be resolved into a collection of units where one man's gain must be another man's loss and the happiness of the greatest number is thus merely the least of many evils, but that the unity is organic, and gain anywhere must, rightly considered, be gain for the whole; that, assuming as primitive a universal selfishness, no alchemy of logic can educe a universal benevolence—"From 'each for himself' to 'each for all' no road!";<sup>51</sup> that distinction in kind between pleasures cannot be reconciled with Mill's initial basis, but involves a criterion other than pleasingness, introduced simply because obligation could not without it be preserved. These are the commonplaces of later criticism, embodied in almost every modern ethical text-book, and, whatever their cogency, each of them was advanced in *Sartor*, in *Heroes*, in *Past and Present*. If they are there clothed in flowing eloquence, this fact, although it is apt to make the school philosopher distrustful, should not give their author a lower place than we assign to those who after a generation's reflection have reached

<sup>51</sup> Martineau, *Types of Ethical Theory*.

precisely the same results, but have stated them with the canonical formality and the canonical dulness.

Again, Carlyle saw what was hidden from most in his time, that the real weakness of the empiricist school lay in its picture of the mind as wholly passive, and in its ignoring of the mental *spontaneities*. The stock in trade of Bentham's critics lay very generally in appeals to "the testimony of consciousness" as guaranteeing this or that principle which they valued but could not satisfactorily prove, and again in threats of unpleasant consequences for religion or morality if the basis in intuitions were given up. The obvious reply was that of Mill, that the alleged voice of consciousness had been arbitrarily reported, that if scientific laws had their root in experience religion and morality might be grounded in the same way, and that in any case the practical consequence of accepting a belief had no legitimate place in the discussion of its truth or falsity. Carlyle in not a few passages has suggested the far more telling attack with which we are now so familiar. He challenged the empirical psychology. He arraigned Bacon as having forgotten in his account of the procedure of science just that element which is most essential to its success, and of offering us only "better methods of labeling, of mixing, compounding and separating." The *novum organum* had affected so to mechanize the process that every man should become by the use of this improved instrument as good a reasoner as any other, just as a dwarf and a giant are equalized by the possession of firearms. Why not, if the machinery of the mind was just a passive sifter by *tabula praesentiae*, *tabula absentiae*, and *tabula graduum*, once the material is presented in experience? Who does not see here precisely the criticism to which Bacon's logical method has since been subjected, that it neglects the active element in mind, the sagacious bethinking oneself of an hypothesis? Still more impres-

sive is Carlyle's insistence that a moral judgment is psychologically falsified if it is thought of as produced from without rather than from within. A striking passage in *The French Revolution* suggests that whole doctrine of values and valuing which is perhaps the most signal advance in the ethical thought of our own time:

"For ours is a most fickle world; and man is the most fidgety, plastic of creatures. A world not fixable; not fathomable! An unfathomable Somewhat, which is *not we*; which we can work with and live amidst—and mould miraculously in our miraculous being, and name World. But if the very rocks and rivers (as metaphysic teaches) are, in strict language, *made* by those outward senses of ours, how much more by the inward sense are all phenomena of the spiritual kind; dignities, authorities, holies, unholies! Which inward sense, moreover, is not permanent like the outward ones, but forever growing and changing."<sup>52</sup>

Again, Carlyle's constant polemic against the reduction of morality to a mode of individual feeling—a polemic which to the present writer seems still imperative—has to be understood with special reference to a certain moral degeneracy in the period that was immediately behind him. Diderot's *sensibilité*, and *âmes nobles*, were not peculiarly French. The moral-sense theorists of England stood in far closer relation than is generally observed—a relation pointed out with great acuteness by Coleridge<sup>53</sup>—to the moral spirit of their age. It was eighteenth-century sentimentalism that roused Carlyle's abhorrence. There was more than one side to that "enfranchisement of the passions" as Professor Dowden called it. It appeared in the

<sup>52</sup> *F. R.*, I, 2.

<sup>53</sup> In *Aids to Reflection*.

emotionalism of the Wesleyan revival and in the philanthropy of Howard and Wilberforce. But it also appeared in *Tom Jones*, in *Tristram Shandy*, in *Humphrey Clinker*, in Schiller's *Robbers*. The reaction against Puritanic rigor had produced an apotheosis of impulse. Everything became forgivable to those who "could be touched by a delicate distress."<sup>54</sup> Carlyle saw clearly the ethical upshot of this tone of thinking. He saw that it was of quite subordinate importance whether we believe in Shaftesbury's "taste" or in More's "boniform faculty" or in the utilitarian "maximization of pleasures" or in any other doctrine which interprets the moral contrast as a struggle among various emotions for the dominance of the will. No striking of an average among such data of personal preference could escape the inherent subjectivity. Moreover, he discerned that in the grounding of morals upon objective reason lay the basis for a real metaphysic. Anti-metaphysician as at times he seemed to be, he was teaching metaphysicians much of their own business. Into how wretched a state that study had passed in Scotland at the date when *Signs of the Times* appeared, may be judged from the fact that the versatile and vivacious "Christopher North" was judged duly fitted to represent the subject in a chair at Edinburgh. Jeffrey was rejoicing that Dugald Stewart had proved the plain man to be in the right after all, so that metaphysics, now shown to be absurd, might henceforth be neglected. Stewart himself, having tried to read Kant in a Latin version, had given it up in despair, declaring his "utter inability to comprehend the author's meaning." At such a moment it was Carlyle who proclaimed that new era in speculation which every one has now come to acknowledge, who declared that though the old level of ontological discussion had disappeared a new level

<sup>54</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Dowden's *French Revolution and English Literature*.

had revealed itself, and who kept imploring the official representatives of philosophy to acquaint themselves with that vital literature which was coming to them from the Continent. And though his own knowledge of German thought was somewhat amateurish, it was that of a brilliant amateur, from whom the professionals, by no means brilliant, had much to learn. The critique upon absolutism in *Characteristics* reads like a passage from William James. And *Sartor* is our evidence that for Carlyle the problem of personality had assumed that crucial character upon which no "personal idealist" could desire to improve.

But if Carlyle's strength lay in flashes of intuitive genius rather than in sustained and disciplined thought, a corresponding account must be given of his weakness. Much that he said of the futility of science must be allowed to have been mere wild and whirling words. Spencer hit the nail on the head when he complained that Carlyle spoke incessantly of the "laws of this universe" and our need to reverence them, but at the same time poured contempt on those who were patiently discovering what these laws are.<sup>55</sup> His contempt for logic was its own nemesis, when he laboriously built up a system to prove that systems are impossible. The idea underlying his famous description of metaphysics as disease was, of course, far from new, and in the enforcement of it he seems to have been the dupe of his own vivid rhetoric torturing a very partial analogy. That speculative restlessness is apt to beset an enfeebled will is one of the many morals which have, rightly or wrongly, been discerned in *Hamlet*. Hegel in a paragraph which every one knows by heart had spoken of the owl of Minerva as taking her flight when the shades of night begin to gather. And since Carlyle's time the same point, possibly borrowed from him, has been exuber-

<sup>55</sup> *Autobiography*.

antly worked by Nietzsche,<sup>56</sup> when he tells us that only a decadent age will evolve "problems," and that in estimating our debt to the Greek world we should place the virile self-confident Thucydides far higher than the brooding, hair-splitting Plato. The comment which at once suggests itself is that if an age has in one sense lost, it has in another and a better sense immensely gained by becoming aware of its own spiritual incoherence. And when Plato declared ὃ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ, he said what all men like Carlyle would have done well to ponder. It is no doubt tempting to cherish a wistful regret for the perfection of the medieval synthesis between thought and life, although a too romantic spirit is apt to represent this harmony as far deeper than it was. It has been well pointed out that the best English thinkers in each period of the Middle Age itself looked back to some point still earlier as an uncorrupted past, and one may guess that at every such point the retrospect was delusive.<sup>57</sup> As George Meredith has remarked about the poetic idealizing of the circle of chivalry, this attitude may perhaps be encouraged for the pleasure of the imagination.<sup>58</sup> But even granting that the so-called times of faith were free from our modern restlessness, the inference is not that inquiry is at best an inevitable evil. Many of the things by which it is awakened may be evil, but in itself inquiry is an intrinsic good, and the evils which provoke it would not be less but greater if it were absent. Peace of mind comes either from rising above or from sinking below the problems that would disturb it, and surely Carlyle of all men should have been the last to suggest that the mere happiness of intellectual immaturity or intellectual stupor is not dearly bought. Nor does it seem to be really needful that grow-

<sup>56</sup> In *What I Owe to the Ancients*.

<sup>57</sup> Cf., e. g., G. G. Coulton, *Chaucer and his England*, Chap. I.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *The Egoist*.

ing reflection should bring with it an impairment of moral nerve. To take our author's own parallel from medicine, it may be that we should never have evolved physiology if we had not known a break-down in health. But does it follow that the better physiologists we are the more unhealthy we must become?

Again we may regret that the reaction against "profit-and-loss morality" should have made Carlyle so *uncritical* an intuitionist, should have blinded him to the need for forecasting results of action, should have led him into his absurd tirade against the reformatory and deterrent view of penal justice,<sup>59</sup> should have prevented him from distinguishing between casuistry that is honest and casuistry that is dishonest. And Julia Wedgwood has well complained that in him the immense portent of Darwinism—the whole transforming movement of thought that had gone so far even while he yet lived—aroused neither enthusiasm nor hostility. For Carlyle evolution was simply as if it had never been. But perhaps his strangest feature of all, one by which some of his other inconsistencies are to be explained, was his lifelong acknowledgment of discipleship to a writer whose creed fundamentally contradicted his own. Few pictures from literary history are more impressive than that of the raw Scottish lad wandering over the moors of Dumfriesshire with his precious copy of *Faust*, and declaring to himself that this poet, almost unknown to Englishmen, had a far wider range and a far fuller note than all the Byrons and Scotts over whom London *salons* had gone mad. It was a case of deep calling unto deep. But once he had taken it upon himself to introduce Goethe to the English-speaking world, Carlyle seems to have forgotten all the obligations of a critic in the zeal of a devotee. A very little of that healthy questioning which he applied, for example, to every work of

<sup>59</sup> In *Latter-Day Pamphlets* ("Model Prisons").

Diderot or Voltaire would have shown him what a difference there was between the spirit of *Faust* and the spirit of *Sartor*.

Whatever else Goethe may be called, we can in no sense call him a Puritan, yet Puritan was the one single name that fitted Carlyle. That the irreducible contrast of right and wrong should be the basis for a cosmic reconstruction was as far as anything could be from the genteel doctrine of *nil admirari*, the superiority to all enthusiasms, art for art's sake, and impartial hospitality to all experiences in a completely rounded life. Cromwell and Knox would assuredly have felt that they had a strange colleague in Carlyle's gallery of heroes. They would have asked what they had in common with one whose interest was to show that the things they loved and the things they hated were alike essential to the harmony of the Whole, and they would have thought it doubly strange that they should have been placed together by a critic who held that not only truth but the beginning of all truths lay in holy intolerance of the evil by the good. Voltaire's noble stand for Calas was a far better proof of kinship with such company. Yet to Carlyle Voltaire was the prince of *persiflage*! Hero worship surely never misled one's judgment further than when a worshiper could see in Newman and Keble only the hollow phrases of formalism, but thought he heard organ notes of moral regeneration pealing from Weimar.

HERBERT L. STEWART.

HALIFAX, N. S.